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ABSTRACT

Certain issues are relevant to the international recognition of vocational qualifications: (1) the assumption that each country does or should value vocational education and training; (2) the quality of the national system and the implications for international recognition of qualifications, including recognition of the accrediting and awarding bodies; and (3) quality assurance and assessment systems being developed in various countries that will contribute to international recognition of qualifications and be used by countries to monitor and judge qualifications from other countries. Clearly, the policies represented by the European Community (EC) Directives will have far-reaching effects as the EC network expands. As part of the EC, the United Kingdom's National Vocational Qualifications Framework will also have a strong influence internationally through the network of Commonwealth countries. Three bodies offer the Higher Diploma (HD) in Hong Kong. A proposal for a memorandum of cooperation whereby HD students would be entitled to a degree by the University of Northumbria at Newcastle was declined. Overseas universities offer programs in Hong Kong that recognize higher vocational qualifications and with conversion courses designed for HD entry. The role of the International Vocational Education and Training Association should be that of a change agent that works with other bodies to ensure more recognition and support is given to higher vocational education. (Contains 26 references.) (YLB)

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INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

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Introduction

Over a period of about ten years, there has been a noticeable (even remarkable) growth of interest and initiative in the development of national policies for the rationalisation and recognition of vocational and professional qualifications, and their relationship to academic qualifications. In general terms this paper will consider higher vocational qualifications as diploma-level (or sub-degree); professional qualifications as requiring a degree together with specified experience and awarded by professional bodies.

The interested parties (roleplayers or stakeholders) include higher education, statutory and professional bodies, and government; and it is government which is setting and driving the agenda in different countries. Is it then self-evident that there should be systems for international recognition of vocational qualifications? It would seem so, at least in a European context, but is there a role for international organisations or international associations? Relevant work of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) was reported at the annual IVETA Conference in Denver (Petrov, 1995); the World Association for Co-operative Education (WACE) has set out a vision statement and an international strategic plan; should IVETA seek to make a significant contribution to the international recognition of vocational qualifications?

Issues are addressed with reference to developments in European and other countries. Some specific comment is made about recent and current developments in Hong Kong.

Issues

The first issue relates to the assumption that each country (or nation state) does or should value vocational education and training (VET). Countries as diverse as the Czech Republic, the Republic of South Africa, Scotland and Taiwan, are seeking to establish higher vocational education as an acceptable and important part of higher education - often interpreted solely in terms of degree education. In the past, if there have been national systems of vocational qualifications these have had the effect of maintaining separation from systems of academic and professional qualifications. This has changed significantly and there is now resolve and action to develop policies and frameworks to integrate and co-ordinate qualifications nationally and, in the case of Europe, internationally.

In England, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), was set up in 1986 to develop the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) Framework - 'a new system of qualifications to meet the needs of industry'. NCVQ is an approval or accrediting body and awarding bodies such as City and Guilds, Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC) are developing their awards to meet NVQ criteria and thereby obtain NCVQ approval.

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In Scotland there is a separate, complementary system with the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) acting as both an awarding and an approval body for SVQs - Scottish Vocational Qualifications. NVQs and SVQs are equivalent and recognised as such by the European Community. On the basis of this equivalence, for the purposes of this paper, reference will be made to NVQ Levels 4 and 5, representing higher (level) vocational qualifications. Definitions are (NCVQ, 1995):

Level 4

> Competence which involves the application of knowledge in a broad range of complex technical or professional work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and with a substantial degree of personal responsibility and autonomy. Responsibility for the work of others and the allocation of resources is often present.

Level 5

> Competence which involves the application of a significant range of fundamental principles and complex techniques across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts. Very substantial personal autonomy and often significant responsibility for the work of others and for the allocation of substantial resources feature strongly, as do personal accountabilities for analysis and diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation.

Level 4 is generally accepted as pass degree equivalent; Level 5 would generally require an honours degree or postgraduate qualification together with experience and continuing professional development in the related occupational area. Essentially NVQs are qualifications about work and are based on standards developed by industry and commerce (NCVQ, 1994).

In January 1995, Australia introduced a unified qualifications system for the three education sectors - higher education, secondary education, technical and further education; and the previously varied 'system' of qualifications has been replaced by one certificate, awarded at four levels, a diploma and an advanced diploma. Universities will continue to issue diplomas and advanced diplomas along with degrees (Times Higher, 1995a). While this is broadly in line with the NVQ Framework, developments in New Zealand are related more to the SCOTVEC model, initiated when Mr Tom McCool, Chief Executive Officer of SCOTVEC, visited New Zealand in 1987.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) will operate a qualifications framework with seven levels including degrees; degrees, like NVQ Levels 4 and 5, will not be unit based but based on national standards. As noted by Times Higher (1995a), 'Accreditation frameworks are going to be needed everywhere'.

This links to developments reported in the USA (Times Higher, 1995b). In 1993, the Department of Education initiated a reform of the accreditation system currently involving eight regional accrediting bodies and seven national higher education associations. The reform proposals include setting up a new national body with new national standards which would no longer be called 'commons standards' but 'threshold standards' i.e. minimum standards which could be developed to reflect local or regional needs. The important concept of threshold or minimum national standards is crucial but is not new. For example, it was articulated in a videotape prepared for the project 'Assessment of Student Performance' (Imrie and Hall,

1988) sponsored by the Authority for Advanced Vocational Awards, the then national accrediting and examining body for higher vocational qualifications in New Zealand.

In regard to accreditation, the opening and closing paragraphs of a paper by Millard (1983) are worth noting - written when he was President of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation in the USA:

> "Accreditation does not determine institutional or programme quality. Educational quality is a characteristic of institutions or programmes, not of accrediting associations. ... while accreditation cannot create quality, it has or it should have a crucial role in determining whether an institution or programme has accepted and is carrying out its commitment to quality. It also provides incentives to encourage enhancement of quality."

> "Accreditation has come a long way from its activities in the first year of this century. The issue of quality will always be with us. If we are to strengthen quality in a period of fiscal stringency, variable enrolment, increased competition, and demands for increased accountability, accreditation must continue to evolve."

A second issue, therefore, is the quality of the *national* system and the implications for international recognition of qualifications including recognition of the accrediting and the awarding bodies. For the individual with a higher vocational qualification from one country there is growing awareness of international opportunities and interest in recognition of qualifications:

(a) for employment;
(b) for professional body membership;
(c) for further study at degree or postgraduate level.

Related to this is the third issue of quality assurance and assessment systems being developed in various countries which will contribute to international recognition of qualifications and, in turn, be used by countries to monitor and judge qualifications (and awarding bodies) from other countries. Some examples will be discussed.

United Kingdom

A commissioned report (Coopers & Lybrand, 1985) which had direct links to the setting up of the NCVQ in 1986, included a foreword by representatives of the commissioning bodies: John Cassels, Director General of the National Economic Development Office and Geoffrey Holland, Director of the Manpower Services Commission. The foreword included a clear international awareness:

> 'The evidence is there ... comparisons between countries, and between companies within the UK, demonstrate the central importance of vocational education and training in the development, production and selling of high quality, competitive products and services."

Under 'Qualifications' was noted the conclusion, considered to be of critical importance:

> 'that there should be the development of a clear structure of qualifications based on the achievement of set standards or competences".

Two awarding bodies in England have been mentioned: City and Guilds (of London Institute) and BTEC. In each case there have been significant international and marketing developments. For City and Guilds (C&G), the following information is taken from the International Handbook (C&G, 1993) and from the Policy Statement (C&G, 1994). This independent body, operating under Royal Charter, has established City and Guilds International as a company to provide services to all countries outside the UK. C&G services are currently provided in some 85 countries including Hong Kong where an agreement has been signed with the Vocational Training Council whereby registered students would be eligible for Certificates of Unit Credit.

C&G will develop international vocational qualifications based as closely as possible on NVQs, covering a range of professions and subjects and offered at basic skill level through to technician and diploma levels. It is worth noting that C&G has incorporated 'World Class Qualifications' as part of its logo.

BTEC became an independent body as recently as 1993 and is marketing itself nationally and internationally with particular reference to NVQ Level 4 (Higher National Diploma - HND) and Level 5. NVQs were awarded by BTEC in 1991 for the first time and the new NVQ at Level 5 in management studies was seen to be a major achievement (Sellars, 1994a). In a publicity leaflet (BTEC, 1994) it was noted:

- a BTEC HND is a nationally and internationally recognised qualification, just like a degree;
- 49% of BTEC HND graduates in summer 1992 went on to complete a degree in one or two years only.

In England, the HND (NVQ Level 4) is part of the national framework of qualifications and credit transfer is automatic. For the English three year honours degree, the HND is recognised as pass degree equivalent and students, generally, are admitted to the final year. However, in some areas such as engineering, professional bodies require two years of degree study.

Engineering

As a link with Europe and with Hong Kong it is worth considering engineering as an example of vocational and professional qualifications requiring recognition among awarding, statutory and professional bodies - nationally as well as internationally.

Sellars (1994) noted that, in 1991, BTEC changed its name from Business & *Technician* Council to Business & *Technology* Council and 'Europe was responsible'.

> 'Specifically, the professional bodies in engineering were negotiating with colleagues in Europe and managed to secure European Community-wide acceptance of the status of Incorporated Engineer (previously Technician Engineer). Achievers of the IE qualification, regardless of the professional body to which they belonged, could practice (sic) anywhere within the EC."

The Engineering Council (UK) defines engineering qualifications in three categories: Chartered Engineer, Incorporated Engineer and Engineering Technician. The term Technician Engineer was superseded by that of Incorporated Engineer by virtue of a supplemental Charter approved by the Privy Council in 1988 - also because of Europe.

In 'Professional Engineering" (Greek, 1994), Professor J Picken, Chairman of the Institution of Mechanical Engineer's Academic Standards Committee which accredits engineering courses, expressed concern about the standard of certain degrees offered and what this means. 'In Singapore, engineering degrees from around half of UK universities are deemed acceptable to the Singapore Board of Engineering, the other half are not. Now this may not seem very important, but it is a damning indictment of an educational system which was once considered one of the best."

Europe

There is not one body responsible for the recognition of vocational qualifications in Europe. Each of the Member States has its own National Co-ordinator responsible for the implementation of Directives. The following information is provided by the Qualifications and ITOs Branch of the Department of Employment, UK (QIB, 1995). QIB has responsibility for a number of European programmes including the Comparability of Vocational Qualifications in the EC, and the Second Diploma Directive on a general system for the recognition of professional qualifications.

The Second Diploma Directive (92/51/EEC) completes the system begun by Directive 89/48/EEC (First Diploma Directive). The First Diploma Directive is the responsibility of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and was implemented in the UK in 1991. It deals with the recognition of qualifications awarded after at least 3 years of higher education. The Second Diploma Directive was agreed by the Council of Ministers on 18 June 1992 and was due to be implemented by 18 June 1994. However, due to the complexity of the Directive we are still working towards an effective implementation measure for the UK.

The Second Directive applies to all occupations which are regulated in any Member State of the Community and will require the bodies controlling entry to professions to recognise equivalent qualifications earned in other Member States. This Directive will extend the system and procedures for recognition to include: qualifications achieved after post-secondary courses of 1-3 years taken after qualifications which are needed to enter university, and equivalents including National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (NVQs/SVQs) levels 3 and 4; awards made on completion of a course following a minimum school-leaving age qualification; and professional experience.

Comparability of vocational training qualifications (EC, 1992) is a system that provides the necessary information on the comparability of vocational training qualifications so that the migrant worker can supply more information on his or her qualifications in order to find work in another Member State.

Legal recognition is required only for access to regulated professions, i.e. occupations which can only be entered by those who hold a diploma, certificate or other qualification from the National Training System, as stipulated by legal, regulatory or administrative provisions. The recognition of diplomas is therefore designed to certify the legal value of a qualification, whereas the system of comparability of qualifications is designed to provide information about the level and scope of vocational training qualifications.

In summary, the First Diploma Directive (December 1988) is aimed at the recognition of diplomas for professional purposes. The Second Diploma Directive (June 1992) is intended to complement the first and includes in the definition of 'diploma', qualifications accredited as NVQs (or SVQs) at Levels 3 and 4 of the UK National Framework of Vocational Qualifications. Note that Level 4 corresponds to the BTEC HND - equivalent to a pass degree. The Directives apply to 17 European countries.

Hong Kong

Having indicated briefly developments in Europe for comparability of vocational training qualifications and for recognition/definition of diplomas in regard to the legal value of a qualification, this section sets out some developments and implications for Hong Kong. More detailed accounts of the development of higher vocational qualifications in Hong Kong can be found in CHVS (1995), Patel and Imrie (1994) and Imrie (1995a, 1995b).

There are three bodies which offer the Higher Diploma (HD) which is the highest vocational qualification and is at the sub-degree level. The University Grants Committee (UGC) is responsible for seven university institutions - two of which (City University of Hong Kong - CityU and Hong Kong Polytechnic University - PolyU) offer the HD. The Vocational Training Council (VTC) has two Hong Kong Technical Colleges (TCs) which offer the HD, and the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLI) is the third body.

The TCs and OLI enrolled their first HD students in 1993 and, late in 1994, the UGC formally initiated a review of such sub-degree programmes as part of a more extensive review of higher education. The report is expected in November 1995. At this stage all of the providers are self-accrediting and there is no Hong Kong body which is responsible for a minimum or threshold standard for the HD in Hong Kong. Mention has already been made of the agreement between City and Guilds (C&G) and the VTC for registered students to be eligible for Certificates of Unit Credit. The OLI also operates a credit system to provide up to 80 credits (50%) for the HD graduate wishing to study for an honours degree.

Noting that only England and Hong Kong offer a three year, full-time honours degree, CityU HD graduates are widely accepted in English universities for entry into the final year of the honours degree. In terms of international recognition the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UNN), acting on behalf of BTEC, carried out an assessment of ten (of 12) HD programmes at CityU, in May 1994. The report confirmed that the HD was well above the minimum (national) standard of the HND (NVQ Level 4) 'generally considered equivalent to a

pass degree'. UNN/BTEC proposed a memorandum of co-operation whereby registered HD students, on graduation and on satisfying the requirements of BTEC's Common Skills Assessment, would also be entitled to the award of HND by UNN. This proposal was declined.

International recognition of higher vocational qualifications is also influenced by professional bodies. For example, honours degrees in engineering awarded in England after one year of study to a CityU HD graduate with advanced standing, will not be accepted by the Engineering Council (UK). In November 1993, an Accreditation Panel of the British Computer Society (BCS) visited CityU. The BCS is the Chartered Engineering Institution for Information Systems Engineers. Eventually (30 November 1994) the Registrar wrote to advise that accreditation (Part 1) for Incorporated Engineer (IEng) had been granted for the HD in Computer Studies. Of particular interest, however, is the following statement:

> "The Committee considered the BSc(Hons) Computing Science, awarded by the University of Ulster. However, since the visit, the Committee has established that the Engineering Council will not endorse a recommendation for accreditation for CEng for a post-Higher Diploma course which is equivalent to less than two years full-time study; moreover the Committee was itself not convinced that an education appropriate for an engineer would be undergone by these students. The Committee therefore decided not to recommend accreditation for CEng for the BSc (Computing Science). I shall be writing formally to the University of Ulster."

The Council of the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers (HKIE) endorsed (8 December 1994) that 'for the purposes of the HKIE, it will only recognise accreditations carried out by its own Accreditation Board after 1.1.95'. In effect, for engineering qualifications, the HKIE is linked internationally with other engineering professional bodies and is the only body which determines minimum standards for Hong Kong. The following definitions are offered in the appendix of the Professional Accreditation Handbook (HKIE, November 1994).

Academic Accreditation

Any evaluation or assessment to determine whether the academic standards of an institution of higher education are comparable with internationally recognised standards. It includes course validation, course revalidation, institutional review and institutional accreditation.

Professional Accreditation

Evaluation and comparison of the academic standards of a degree or sub-degree and consideration of the appropriateness of the education component of that degree or sub-degree for professional practice.

Internationally, there are overseas universities which offer programmes in Hong Kong that recognise higher vocational qualifications and with conversion courses designed for HD entry. For example, the earlier quote from the BCS Registrar referred to the BSc(Hons) Computing Science awarded by the University of Ulster. Ulster offers this degree to graduates with HD in Computer Studies and the part-time programme can be completed in two years. As noted, the students obtain an academic qualification which, however, is not recognised for a professional qualification.

In this regard it is relevant to note that, in Hong Kong, the education (overseas tertiary institutions - OTIs) (exemption) order came into operation on 15 February 1994. The press release noted that 'the objective would be to ensure that the standards of the courses offered

by OTIs in Hong Kong were recognised by the OTIs themselves as well as by the accrediting authorities in their countries of origin'. The legislation noted the following definitions.

'Recognised academically' means being recognised as having attained the academic standard required for a sub-degree, a degree or postgraduate course;

'Recognised professionally' means being recognised as having attained the academic standard required by a professional body.

The press release also noted that the legislation will aim to ensure that the standards of courses delivered in Hong Kong would be maintained at levels comparable to those achieved on-campus in the institutions overseas.

Here is an example of the UK National Qualifications Framework establishing a presence in Hong Kong with Oxford University as the 'OTI'. The Overseas Chinese Daily News (OCD News, 1994) reported that the Management Development Centre of Hong Kong (MDC) 'has joined hands' with Oxford University in launching the 'Management Development Qualifications' (MDQ); also that the NVQ is divided into 5 levels; and for the subject of management, level 3 caters for supervisors, level 4 for managers and level 5 for senior executives.

In just over two years, Hong Kong will become a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China and it is likely that there will be some convergence of such matters as academic and professional accreditation. Reaction from professional bodies in Hong Kong, was noted (Lau, 1994) when the culture sub-group of the Preliminary Working Committee (China) suggested that Hong Kong should recognise degrees awarded by all the 516 mainland universities approved by the Chinese State Council Academic Bureau. Under a scheme administered by the Education and Manpower Branch (Hong Kong), graduates of 35 top Chinese universities - considered to be of the highest standard by the Chinese State Education Commission - are allowed to apply to come to work in Hong Kong.

For degree recognition purposes, arrangements are being made for the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) to undertake this responsibility. HKCAA previously accredited degree programmes in the polytechnics which became self-accrediting in 1993, and universities in 1994. Accordingly HKCAA has considerable experience in this regard and would be the appropriate body to develop an appropriate qualifications framework for Hong Kong post-1997.

Finally, for China, Cheung (1994) suggests that 'a comprehensive system of validation and moderation by local or overseas external bodies can help to establish and maintain standards of curricula offered which may help to gain national or international professional recognition of graduate qualifications'.

Vision

In this paper the discussion of international recognition of (higher) vocational qualifications has noted the influence and roles of a range of bodies: government, statutory, professional and higher education. In the UK 'A Vision for Higher Level Vocational Qualifications' (ED, 1995) sets out the views of a Higher Levels Strategy Group formed to respond to the Government's call to complete the NVQ/SVQ framework of vocational qualifications at Levels 4 and 5. The deadline for comment is 31 May 1995; there is no doubt that the

outcomes will have European and wider, international implications. For example, it was reported (Times Higher, 1995c) that the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) is seeking to export its system i.e. the NVQ Framework. 'Several Arab states are offering NVQs, and Mexico is this week expected to establish its own vocational council after nearly two years of consultation with the NCVQ."

It is worth noting the following general principles on which the Vision is based:

- Vocational qualifications at the higher levels will also be based on national standards, but their nature and definition may in many instances be different from those of lower level qualifications.

- The unit structure of vocational qualifications should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the range of career routes in occupations.

- The vision offers a comprehensive and high quality system of vocational qualifications built on common structures and related directly to the challenges of working life.

- A cohesive set of qualifications derived through a public process involving clearly defined partnerships and resulting in agreed occupational standards could benefit existing structures and increase public confidence and accountability in the 'professions'.

At this point there has been no mention of the possible influence and roles of international associations. For one such body, the World Association for Co-operative Education (WACE), the Council has recently published its own Vision/Mission/Strategy. The Vision Statement is:

> WACE will facilitate world-wide development of partnerships between the education and the public and private sectors for purposes of human resources development.
>
> By the year 2000, WACE will be viewed as a highly-valued leader in enhancing work-integrated learning world-wide.

IVETA

The conclusion of this paper is that it *is* self-evident that there should be a system for international recognition of vocational qualifications. While this might be obvious the implications are profound and far-reaching. A particular consideration is the role that IVETA might have in addressing such implications and in seeking to work co-operatively with other bodies - such as those mentioned in this paper.

Clearly the policies represented by the European Community Directives will have far-reaching effects as the EC network expands. As part of the EC, the UK NVQ Framework will also have a strong influence internationally through the network of Commonwealth countries (e.g. New Zealand).

To an extent, the USA and Canada represent major areas of activity for the co-op model of vocational and professional higher education and WACE works in association with a range of co-op organisations. Both countries have well-established credit systems linking vocational,

sub-degree qualifications with degree programmes - without the need for national vocational qualification frameworks as discussed in this paper.

IVETA, however, with its affiliation to the American Vocational Association (AVA), and its international representation could consider the following initiatives:

- develop a vision, mission and strategy with the aim of participating in the development of international recognition of vocational qualifications; by
- working with the AVA to raise awareness of UK, European and international developments;
- working with NCVQ, BTEC, SCOTVEC, British Council and the ILO to raise awareness of opportunities for networks to develop - by strengthening and focusing the IVET Journal, and by co-sponsoring of regional conferences on international recognition of vocational qualifications;
- working with international/professional bodies for similar purposes and, in association with international funding bodies such as the World Bank, seeking to develop national projects as part of an international framework;
- working with associations such as WACE and with international conferences such as 'Assessing Quality in Higher Education' to develop synergies and greater effectiveness;
- using the internet creatively to monitor national developments and, in turn, to inform potential opportunities for further development.

As an agent for change, IVETA could and should seek to work with other bodies as a demonstration of capability (competent, co-operative, creative and cope-able) so that much more recognition and support is given to higher vocational education - so long neglected by the elitism of degree-only higher education.

Using engineering, again, as a continuing example, it was only in 1992 that Baroness Platt of Writtle wrote, under the heading 'It's the qualification that matters' (Platt, 1992):

> "We need a national campaign to upgrade the status of technicians. We need to promote not only technician careers in themselves, but also the opportunities that BTEC's qualifications offer people - as years go by and having been motivated by success - for them to consider degrees. The Privy Council has started that ball rolling for the engineering profession by giving its blessing to the title incorporated engineer - which has lately been reinforced by a European directive. The Engineering Council is now positively encouraging people to register for the title, and employers can help by demanding that their employees *do* register with the Council, not only as incorporated engineers but also as engineering technicians."

Vocational qualifications do matter and there should be an international, as well as a European, campaign to upgrade their status. I hope that IVETA'95 will support this request to the Association to address the issues and the opportunities, to consult the membership and to report back at the annual meeting in Denver at the end of the year.

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